

HOW TO STUDY THE BIBLE



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The Prophets – Study #10

PROPHETS (NeBAIIM)			
FORMER PROPHETS	LATTER PROPHETS		
	Major Prophets	The Twelve	
Joshua	Isaiah	Hosea	Nahum
Judges	Jeremiah	Joel	Habakkuk
Samuel	Ezekiel	Amos	Zephaniah
Kings		Obadiah	Haggai
		Jonah	Zechariah
		Micah	Malachi

Introduction

More books of the Bible are “prophetic” than any other single genre.

They are separated into two categories:

- Former Prophets – Joshua to 2 Kings (excluding Ruth)
- Latter Prophets – Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and the Twelve. (Daniel and Lamentations are considered part of the “Writings.”)

What Makes a Book Prophetic?

The Key word is covenant. A writing is prophetic if it speaks to the moral, ethical, and religious life of the people of God in covenant with God and each other.

The prophets were spokespersons (male and female) who called the people of God back to faithfulness to the spirit and morality of the covenant.

The prophets communicated their message in three ways:

- By means of written oracles: “This says the Lord!”

This is what the LORD says—

your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel:

“I am the LORD your God,
who teaches you what is good for you
and leads you along the paths you should follow. (Isaiah 48:17)

- By means of actions that show how God wants us to understand covenant relationships.

Then the LORD said to me, “Go and love your wife again, even though she commits adultery with another lover. This will illustrate that the LORD still loves Israel, even though the people have turned to other gods and love to worship them. (Hosea 3:1)

See also Jeremiah 13:1-11 (Loincloth as an example of Judah and Israel)

- By means of stories of appropriate or inappropriate covenant behaviour.

This is what the LORD says:

“The people of Israel have sinned again and again,
and I will not let them go unpunished!

They sell honorable people for silver
and poor people for a pair of sandals.

They trample helpless people in the dust
and shove the oppressed out of the way.

Both father and son sleep with the same woman,
corrupting my holy name.

At their religious festivals,
they lounge in clothing their debtors put up as security.

In the house of their gods,
they drink wine bought with unjust fines. (Amos 2:6-8)

A Common Question – Isn't Prophecy the Telling of the Future?

The biblical answer is NO!!!

The prophets did not sit down to simply write about the future like some kind of fortune teller. They were preachers, revivalists, exhorters to spirituality, and covenant “police-officers.”

Certainly, we read many passages in the Latter Prophets that tell of the future, and we can learn of the wonders and terrors of what is yet to come. We can attempt to work out some of the details of what the future holds (whether a tribulation, millennium, messianic rule, judgments, New Heavens/New Earth), but the point of all these futuristic “prophecies” is to speak to the present people of God, and give them warnings of judgment and messages of hope.

A critical text to understand before we talk anything about the future is 2 Peter 3:10-14.

But the day of the Lord will come as unexpectedly as a thief. Then the heavens will pass away with a terrible noise, and the very elements themselves will disappear in fire, and the earth and everything on it will be found to deserve judgment.

Since everything around us is going to be destroyed like this, what holy and godly lives you should live, looking forward to the day of God and hurrying it along. On that day, he will set the heavens on fire, and the elements will melt away in the flames. But we are looking forward to the new heavens and new earth he has promised, world filled with God’s righteousness.

And so, dear friends, while you are waiting for these things to happen, make every effort to be found living peaceful lives that are pure and blameless in his sight. (2 Peter 3:10-14)

The Social Consciousness of the Prophetic Writings

It may come as a surprise to most of us, but the prophets were significantly interested in the “social gospel” – the part of the covenant that has to do with loving our neighbour as ourselves.

For example: Isaiah 1:10
 Amos 2:6-8
 Malachi 3:5

“At that time, I will put you on trial. I am eager to witness against all sorcerers and adulterers and liars. I will speak against those who cheat employees of their wages, who oppress widows and orphans, or who deprive the foreigners living among you of justice, for these people do not fear me,” says the LORD of Heaven’s Armies.
(Malachi 3:5)

Also, the prophets articulated the moral and ethical demand of God as well as the character of the kingdom of God

For example: Jeremiah 9:23-24
 Isaiah 42:1-4

This is what the LORD says:

“Don’t let the wise boast in their wisdom,
or the powerful boast in their power,
or the rich boast in their riches.

But those who wish to boast

should boast in this alone:

that they truly know me and understand that I am the LORD
who demonstrates unfailing love
and who brings justice and righteousness to the earth,
and that I delight in these things.

I, the LORD, have spoken! (Jeremiah 9:23-24)

As we read the prophets, we must be very aware that this is a significant factor in their messages of present blessing/cursing as well as future judgment and hope (as per Deuteronomy).

The Forms of the Prophetic Message

Noting the following factors should help us read and interpret the prophets.

1. They wrote oracles

The Latter Prophets are collections of oracles. We look for introductory headings (e.g. “The word of the LORD came to me saying”) or concluding remarks (e.g. “says the LORD”).

2. They wrote in poetry

The poetry is not a poetry of rhyme, but of parallel lines that belong together in some kind of relationship (synonymous, opposite, building, etc.).

We need to remember that what we have inspired is what they wrote, not what they preached.

3. They used some striking language and structures

- Sometimes they set their message up as a lawsuit

Often the image of a court scene with prosecutor, witnesses, judge, and defendant is used by the prophet. (e.g. Isaiah 1:2-9)

- They loved to use the “woe” oracle

A favourite word of the prophets is “woe”

Woe in some versions is translated as “What sorrow.” It is a statement of grief and lament used in funerals! (e.g. Jeremiah 9:17-22; Amos 5:2)

Jesus used the “woe” on a number of occasions. (See Matthew 11:21; 18:7; 23:13-29; Luke 6:24-26)

- There were lots of promises

There are many promises of the future in the prophets. Often you will see the opening phrase “in that day.” These promises can be both positive and negative.

The positive ones are called *salvation oracles*. These oracles give wonderful promises of hope and salvation. They serve as an encouragement to the beleaguered people of God that there is a future day coming when they will be vindicated, justice will prevail, and God’s kingdom will ultimately rule.

e.g. Amos 9:11-15; Isaiah 2:1-4; 4:2-6

The negative ones often talk about “the day of the LORD.” The prophets will talk about “in that day” and there is an ominous feel about what is to come. These oracles announce judgment that will come to the ungodly.

e.g. Isaiah 7:18-25; Joel 2:1

Handling the Prophets

Basic prophetic messages are as follows:

1. The covenant has been broken – you must repent!
2. If no repentance occurs, judgment is coming!
3. Beyond the judgment, there is hope that results in future restoration.

Basic three-fold indictments

1. Idolatry

2. Social injustice
3. Religious ritualism

To summarize: The key word for the prophets is *covenant*.

Lastly, often, the responsibility for Pastors and Religious Leaders is to wear the “prophetic mantle” at times to call God’s people back into covenantal relationship with him. Matters like social justice, moral and ethical behaviour, and more, were key to the message of the prophets. Those same messages are still needed today.